

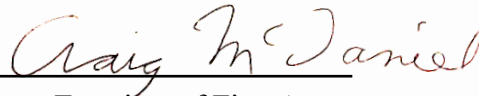
Future Tense

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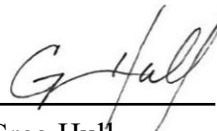


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Future Tense

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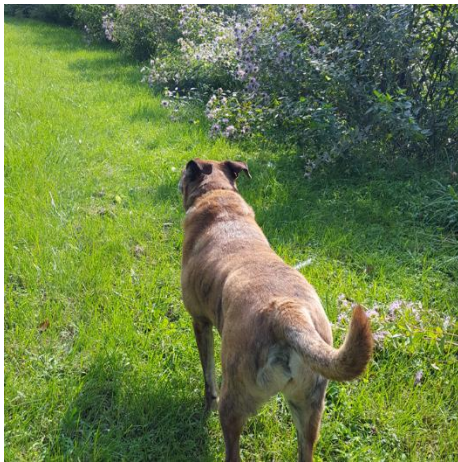
Nature - Humans - Past - Future - Presence - Absence

These familiar terms are the stepping stones of thought that went into my thesis work. While some may pair these words together as dichotomies, I concentrate on the balancing act that exists between them.

Since the first Industrial Revolution beginning in the mid-18th century, human activities have significantly altered the rest of the natural world. Other species have evolved in reaction to circumstances produced by human actions. Through my own observations of nature and research into how humans have impacted nature's evolution, speculation began to swell as to what does the future look like? My thesis work presents found objects from human life intermingled with my own ceramic pieces that are inspired by nature but have elements of peculiarity. The relics represent a human existence and the ceramic components act as a symbol of other forms of life. These familiar, yet odd growth forms imply futurity, a continued existence. This futurity is stemming from a human element that is clearly from the past, combined with this altered view of nature. Are humans of the past too? Are these growths something of the future? At a fundamental level, the work I make as an artist is intended to imply that life will continue in some form, with or without us. My work evokes a glimpse of how things may evolve in the future in order to stress the importance of mindful consideration of how the decisions we make impact the environment.

NATURE

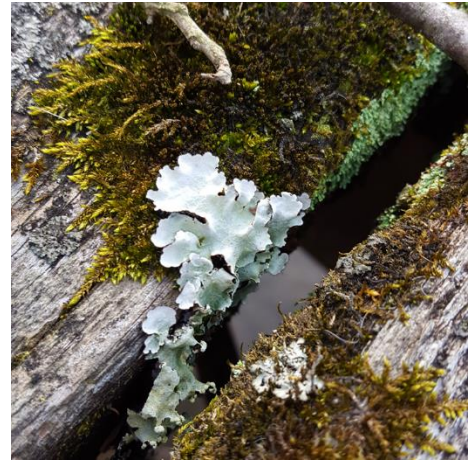
To talk about the influence of Nature on my research, I first need to touch on my process and inspiration.



Backyard, 2019

I am fortunate to live on about two acres of land of which I have walked every inch and have learned its details well. This parcel of land has been relatively undisturbed for decades. Life thrives here: wildlife, native plants, countless birds and insects. There's a creek as a water source, mature trees, good soil. This plot contains things that help support life and it is a

treasure trove of inspiration for me. I see nature's resilience and fragility in daily life in my own surroundings.



Backyard, 2019

Years of familiarity have given me the opportunity to notice things that are new and things that have died or disappeared. The smell of fresh dirt that has been scattered from a new hole on the hill – what animal dug it? I have witnessed lightning striking a hundred-year-old black walnut tree and splitting its bark the length of the tree, looking like a garment to be taken off. My kids have been additional explorers of our plot, bringing attention to things I may have overlooked, such as snakes moving through short grass, making a parted, curved line or sunning themselves near the creek bed with contrasting patterns of rock and scales.



Backyard collection, 2019

My family and all of these living things coexist in this space. These observations are strong and powerful in my mind and have a huge impact on my spirit. They, in turn, have an equally significant influence on my creative practice.

My own yard is a place that I feel in sync with. It brings me comfort. Another environment has provided an equally impactful experience. In 2019, I was able to go to Sweden, where my grandparents emigrated from, to attend a dedication for my uncle. He spent much of his latter life bridging a sister city relationship between the heavily Swedish-American community in which he lived in the U.S. with a town on the Swedish island of Öland, where my grandparents originated. Having travelled quite a bit during my life, I was struck by how differently I interpreted my surroundings there. There was a strong feeling of ancestral connection to this place.



Sweden, 2019

While my upbringing had been filled with Swedish traditions and interactions with my relatives who still live there, I had never before felt such a primal link to an environment. The colors, textures and smells seemed incredibly familiar. Honestly, I felt like I was home. All of these environmental observations meld together to inspire artworks that are not exact representations of specific things in nature but are a conglomeration of living things I have seen or can imagine existing in the future.

The ceramic pieces I create are simplified in form, in line with the work of Ruth Duckworth (1919-2009). Like Duckworth, my inspiration stems from the natural world and uses curved shapes with simple lines. Our works both follow a limited color palette and have an organic sensibility. Duckworth was a ceramicist who primarily focused on sculptural work, but she would also make vessels. While her natural world inspiration was primarily the human form, rocks and shells, I mainly look to fungi, lichen and plant growths when composing forms.¹



Lofted Bloom, stoneware & barn loft, 8 feet x 3 feet x 10 inches, 2020.

Lofted Bloom groups large, glossy growths with matte pink and yellow interiors that contrast with the aged lumber of the barn loft they reside in. These growths are gathered in a fashion that is reminiscent of ladybugs huddled together inside of a structure, hiding from winter. They reflect a familiar life form and configuration, while catching the eye in their large scale and association to their setting. I use phenomenology, a theory in which reality is based on how our senses perceive it, as a method to help transport the viewer to a fictive time and place.

“Phenomenology is best understood as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophizing, which emphasizes the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe *phenomena*, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer. As such, phenomenology’s first step is to seek to avoid all misconstructions and impositions placed on experience in advance, whether these are drawn from religious or cultural traditions, from everyday common sense, or indeed, from science itself. Explanations are not to be imposed before the phenomena have been understood from within.”²

Phenomenology is a convenient tool to streamline acceptance of my ceramic pieces, which are unusual in scale, glossiness and color, as representations of a future nature. I use the attributes of phenomenology in my work, to aid in building the futuristic world in which my pieces live.

HUMAN

Human-caused evolution: In the past and present, the actions of humans have caused other living things to evolve and adapt to new circumstances. Life forms adapt to the circumstances around them in order to survive or, if they fail to evolve, they may perish. This adaptation has forever been part of nature and it will continue on into the future with outcomes and ramifications being in a state of flux. In his book, *Inheritors of the Earth*, biologist Chris D. Thomas discusses how human preferences have caused species to adapt and evolve in ways that may not have occurred without our interference. One example he explores is the house sparrow. He notes how the house sparrow thrives around people, and with the spread of human populations over the landscapes of Europe, the house sparrow populations spread with them. This sprawl led to opportunity for species of house sparrows to grow closer together and create new hybrid species.

“Humans have not only changed the world’s ecology, enabling house sparrows to spread around the world, we have also altered the trajectory of evolution.”³

Michael Pollan follows a similar concept in *Botany of Desire*, regarding the domestication of the dog.

“Evolution may reward interdependence, but our thinking selves continue to prize self-reliance. The wolf is somehow more impressive to us than the dog. Yet there are fifty million dogs in America today, only ten thousand wolves. So what does the dog know about getting along in this world that its wild ancestor doesn’t? The big thing the dog knows about – the subject it has mastered in the ten thousand years it has been evolving at our side – is us: our

needs and desires, our emotions and values, all of which it has folded into its genes as part of a sophisticated strategy for survival.”⁴



Passing Through, Old bridge wood, raku fired stoneware, moss, 8 feet x 4 feet x 8 inches, 2019.

Adaptation to a human object was the intention of *Passing Through*. Nature is represented in these odd growths that inhabit an old foot bridge that is clearly aged and weathered. Their shape and sporadic gathering replicates what occurs in nature but their shininess and iridescence of their interiors and charred, textured exteriors reflect a future, evolved state. The scale of the ceramic pieces suggest they are a new inhabitant of a material formerly used by people. Using multiples of one type of component to create a larger piece played a role in conceptualizing this piece. This work taught me to use raku firing to emphasize the

individuality of each component. The raku process is intense, full of smoke and fire. This violent action births items that are magical, scorched and full of life. Results are unpredictable, which adds to each component's uniqueness. This scorched result gives a sense of renewal, altered life, evolution. Their existence on an old bridge lumber connects this evolution to human presence.

In *Passing Through*, I use the object of the bridge as a vehicle of time in reference to humans. The artist, Mark Dion, describes himself as a collector of things. His artwork uses found objects to convey information to the viewer in a historical context. His objects catalog a moment in time and Dion compiles them together very deliberately. He is also very deliberate in his preservation of his found objects. For the sculpture *Neukom Vivarium*, Dion carefully collected insects and fungi from the fallen hemlock, which was the primary found object in his piece, so they could be incorporated back into the final work.⁵ For *Passing Through*, I was mindful to keep the moss which was growing on the bridge boards intact. Like Dion, the objects I use in my work are selectively chosen, but they serve, both figuratively and literally, as a building block for the ceramic components that I make.

Industrial Revolution: The Industrial Revolution marked a dramatic change in humans' relationship with the environment. Since the time of the initial Industrial Revolution, nature has reacted to humans' influence on it. Successive industrial revolutions have contributed to air pollution, water pollution, soil contamination, and habitat destruction. The first Industrial era was highlighted by the invention of steam power, the second era began with electrically powered mass production, and the third era marked the development of electronics and computer technology. In the current, fourth Industrial Revolution, more significant digital

technology will present new effects on the environment. With advancements such as the Internet of Things, which is the communication between internet-connected devices, some advancements may be positive. For example, more accurate tracking of water and electricity usage in manufacturing is possible. Internet-linked devices can also reduce the need for people to physically go onsite for environmental monitoring, therefore making it easier and less disruptive.⁶ Some possible negatives of this fourth revolution would include improper disposal of electronic devices and 5G Network radio wave exposure to plants and animals, including us. In an article entitled, “The Previous Industrial Revolutions Broke the Environment. Can the current one fix it?”, Jahda Swanborough states:

“The first three industrial revolutions led to many of our current environmental problems. Unsafe levels of air pollution for 92% of the world’s population, climate change, the depletion of fishing stocks, toxins in the rivers and soils, overflowing levels of waste on land and in the ocean, and deforestation can all be traced to industrialization. We now have a unique opportunity to harness the Fourth Industrial Revolution to help fix environmental issues and to redesign how we manage our shared global environment.”⁷

These stages of industrial revolution mark an evolution of technology but also of humankind. Over the years, humans have seemingly become increasingly disconnected with the rest of nature. The entirety of the natural world evolves in reaction to these changes. Future evolutions will dictate what forms of life will survive these changes. Acknowledgement of how we, as a species, need to make mindful choices regarding the environment, is critical for our own survival.



Drain-Age, old drainage pipe and stoneware, 7 feet x 18 inches x 18 inches, 2020.

An element of infrastructure, a discarded drainage pipe, reflects human activity in *Drain-Age*. It is an object that is often overlooked but is recognizable. Regulating water flow is its purpose, making roads, housing developments and other structures buildable. It is a necessary material for “progress”. With the spread of people comes the introduction of components like this simple pipe to enable people’s ability to manipulate the environment to suit their needs. Covering this pipe are pieces with cracked glazing with green undertones, which imply a spreading of these futuristic growths. Random growth patterns and variation in small and larger pieces emphasize this feeling of spread.

Lagom: Lagom is a Swedish philosophy of balance; a not too much, not too little approach to life. For me, this premise offers a bit of hope for our long-term existence. This is a state of mind that the Swedes strive for in all aspects of their lives; how they eat, how they spend money, how they design their homes, how they interact with their community and how they approach their environment. This balanced mindset would be beneficial to nature and humans, when it comes to how we use our resources and how we share this planet.

I am attracted to Lagom as my work implies how nature will continue on in some form, with or without humans. Therefore, it is in our own best interest to act on environmental issues with a similar balanced manner.



Pod Baskets, Stoneware, rusted steel wire, raw cotton and red oak blocks, 10 inches x 24 inches x 24 inches, 2019.

Pod Baskets are a play on traditional ceramics and the idea of balance. They are functional, even if impractical due to their small size and pointed exteriors. They are vessels that have been thrown on a wheel with a handle and a trimmed foot, all features that are a link to humans. The strange growths added to the vessels are a nod to nature and add to their peculiarity. With a Lagom mindset, their function and form stand in balance with naturalistic growths to show a coexistence of humans with another living entity.

PAST & FUTURE



Future Tense, gas can and stoneware, 12 in x 10 in x 10 in, 2019.

The idea of balancing extends to the link between past and future. I envision futurity – a renewed or continuing existence – however, what this continuing existence will be is unknown. I press this uncertainty in my work. Why do the elements representing nature seem strange in their setting? Are humans there during this slice of time? I like the idea of this

futurity stemming from a human element that is clearly from the past, combined with my attempt at a future, altered state of nature. I play with this element of time – past and future, to affect the viewer's reaction to the work.

In *Future Tense*, the relic is an old gas can. Even if the viewer is too young to know its previous use, they recognize that it is an object that was once used by a person or people. This object was repetitively used to feed engines that performed tasks that would otherwise be more laborious for human hands. On it are ceramic pieces that are glossy, small, white and pink, that seem to have sprouted on the aged metal surface. The piece hangs at a tilt from the ceiling, seemingly floating against white walls and windows. A few ceramic pieces have started to grow from the bottom of the can, clinging to each other, defying the odds, contributing to a state of imbalance.

The components of this piece live intertwined in a shared space. One component represents a human existence and another a symbol of other forms of life. The gas can has deteriorated over time and had been discarded. It is an object of the past. These factors bring up the question...are humans of the past too? The growths are a strange addition to the metal, with their glossy, smooth finish. Are they something of the future? Have these growths evolved in order to survive? Are they filling a void of something that is now absent?

PRESENCE & ABSENCE

These questions lead one to wonder about the state of absence and/or presence of humans and nature.

In *Inheritors of the Earth*, Chris Thomas gives his observations of a visit to the Ukrainian town of Pripyat, 30 years after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. He notes the state of species of non-native trees that were planted by humans before the disaster and various mammals that have found their way to that place, one way or another.⁸

“Nature is taking back the land, but the forest that is returning includes North American as well as European trees, and Asian raccoon dogs seek meals on the abandoned streets. When humans leave part of the world, it does not return to a pre-human state.”⁹

My work lives in a world in which the order of living things is skewed. Peter Latz, a German landscape architect, played with this relationship of human objects and plants on a massive scale in *Landschaftspark*. He created the public park in 1991 on 400 acres of an abandoned ironworks factory that reads like an interactive art installation. For remediation of the site, he chose to not remove the metal structures and much of the rubble and instead allowed much of the plants to grow up among the debris. While some of the plants were there previously or were brought in for the project, many areas of the park are marked by varieties of plants that came to this place on their own and grew in areas where the debris was left, making it a unique growing environment.¹⁰ While his work deals with the past and current conditions, mine takes us to a similar intersection between humans and plants but with a futuristic spin and on a smaller scale.



Hammer Time, Rusted hammer with stoneware, 3 in x 3.5 in x 12 in, 2019.

In *Hammer Time*, I use an aged ball peen hammer. Its handle has been worn smooth over years of handling. Its slender hardwood shaft is still sturdy and comforting in the hand. One imagines it once was a steady companion in regular use by its human handler. What has happened to its partner?

Again, futurity is implied through growth forms that are odd in their shapes, and in their glossy yet charred finish as well as their seemingly large scale relative to the hammer. What type of evolutions are to come? These growths are clearly present. One can envision that they could continue to multiply and soon overwhelm the hammer. The state of the weathered hammer, with its rusted metal and darkened wooden handle brings forth the question – are humans now absent? Is their existence being replaced by other life forms?

I want the viewer to ponder about the relics of the past being presented with an implication of the future. With this, is there an absence of humans and a presence of other living forms in this glimpse of futurity? How is the balance tipping between these elements?

While discussing the ideas behind my work with my 12 year-old daughter, she referenced a post-World War I poem she had just learned in school. After she read it to me, I was struck by how clearly it speaks to some of my thoughts.

[Use this link for audio](#)

There Will Come Soft Rains

There will come soft rains and the smell of the ground,
And swallows circling with their shimmering sound;
And frogs in the pools singing at night,
And wild plum trees in tremulous white,
Robins will wear their feathery fire
Whistling their whims on a low fence-wire;
And not one will know of the war, not one
Will care at last when it is done.
Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree
If mankind perished utterly;

And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn,
Would scarcely know that we were gone.

by Sara Teasdale, born 1884

Over the course of our history, human activities have caused widespread and complex changes to the rest of nature. Our actions have caused and are causing evolutions that are in continuum. With a perpetually evolving nature, outcomes are uncertain. Nature, humans, past, future, presence, absence - this is my work boiled down to the purest terms. All of these elements live in a shared space in my mind and my practice. Relics from people's lives intermingle with vibrant and odd, new growths in my work. This ambiguity alludes to the balancing act that goes on between humans and the rest of the living world. With my thesis work, I present a glimpse of the future and question how things may be.

Notes

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- ¹ Lauria, Jo. *Color and Fire: Defining Moments in Studio Ceramics, 1950-2000*. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2000. 180.
- ² Moran, Dermot. *Introduction to Phenomenology*. New York: Routledge, 2000, 4.
- ³ Thomas, Chris D. *Inheritors of the Earth*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2017, 22.
- ⁴ Pollan, Michael. *The Botany of Desire*. New York: Random House, 2001, xvi-xvii.
- ⁵ “Ecology”, Art 21, Season 4, Aired: November 11, 2007.
- ⁶ Folk, Emily. “What Impact Would a Fourth Industrial Revolution have on the Planet”, Conservation Folks, March 18, 2019.
<https://www.conservationfolks.com/?s=fourth+industrial.html>(accessed, (accessed April 17, 2020).
- ⁷ Swanborough, Jahda. "The Previous Industrial Revolutions Broke the Environment. Can the Current One Fix It?" In *World Economic Forum*, April 20,2017.
<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/04/fix-the-environment-there-s-an-app-for-that/>, (accessed March 28,2020).
- ⁸ Thomas, Chris D. *Inheritors of the Earth*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2017, 216.
- ⁹ Ibid, 2017, 215.
- ¹⁰ Episode 20, *Gardener’s World*, BBC, 51:40 – 54:40. Aired: July 26, 2019.

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